The University of Texas System
Nine Universities. Six Health Institutions. Unlimited Possibilities.

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June 13, 2014

Ms. Emma Dishner
Chair, Student Advisory Council
The University of Texas System
Office of Academic Affairs
601 Colorado Street
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Dear Emma:

I write to express my sincere appreciation to you and the members of the Student Advisory Council for your articulate and impactful recommendations presented to the U. T. System Board of Regents at their May meeting.

I commend the 2013 – 2014 Student Advisory Council (SAC) for the leadership you have demonstrated on each of your campuses, and it serves as an excellent reflection of all of the students and institutions that you represent.

Each of your recommendations were carefully reviewed and considered by me, the executive team, and members of the staff in the Office of Academic Affairs, Office of Health Affairs, and the Institute for Transformational Learning.   After each recommendation I will share a brief response.

Academic Affairs Committee

Recommendation - ADA Online Compliance

We, The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council, commend the Board of Regents for employing technology in a 21st century education. Equal access to and the utilization of these services is a modern necessity. However, it is important to bring awareness to the needs of students with disabilities in the implementation of technological advancements.

Students with disabilities should be provided the accommodations necessary to take advantage of academic technologies, in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504). For example, it is the case that online, hybrid, and traditional courses require the use of specific software, some of which have limited compatibility with screen readers required by the visually impaired.

To address this issue, SAC asks the Board of Regents to establish a means of evaluation and to continue improving learning tools for ADA compliance. Additionally, we recommend that the Board of Regents consider the active involvement of students with disabilities, and the offices that support them, in the implementation of online learning tools.

By lending students a voice in this matter, we will ensure that all students are offered the quality of education and opportunities they deserve

Response:
The U. T. System Information Technology (IT) Office and the Institute for Transformational Learning (ITL) are committed to making all digital educational materials and experiences accessible to users of all abilities. Through campus chief information officers, the Shared Service Alliance for Distance Education, the assistance of outside experts and consultants, and feedback from users, IT and ITL will continuously seek to identify and evaluate opportunities for improving the usability and accessibility of digital content and services in use across the U. T. System.

Academic Affairs Committee

Recommendation - Institute for Transformational Learning (ITL) Online Resources

SAC recommends that The University of Texas System create a unified online learning resource platform consisting of eBooks, eJournals, databases, and educational applications. This would make high quality online educational resources available to graduate and undergraduate students in a more uniform and cost-efficient manner.

The ITL seeks to ensure that all Texans have access to an affordable, elite-calibre education, emphasizing inquiry, exploration, active learning, and rigorous assessment.

Currently, institutions individually manage the online learning resources that are made available to their students. Students across various institutions have vastly different access to educational materials despite being a part of the same system. Collaboration among institutions, perhaps through ITL, can alleviate these issues.

Similar to the U. T. System Board of Regents, we endorse the research and implementation of ITL and acknowledge that many of the institutions and programs are very innovative in making online resources available to students whether the programs are online, blended, or traditional classroom. However, we believe that a structured collaboration of the institutions can combine the purchasing power of all System institutions so that the contracts may be less costly and facilitate institutional-level discussions on possible basic resources that should be commonly available to all students Systemwide.

By unifying online learning resources such as eBooks, eJournals, databases, and educational applications, the U. T. System will increase buying power in public-private partnerships, which will ultimately lead to both improved learning for all students and reducing costs.

Response:

Working in close collaboration with U. T. System IT, the U. T. System Library Advisory Board, campus leadership and faculty, the ITL will work to facilitate the development of a unified strategy for digital content services that will:

(1) encourage cross-institutional consistency in the accessibility, affordability and quality of digital materials available to faculty and students;
(2) facilitate Systemwide collaboration on the development of digital materials and learning applications; and
(3) provide an elegant, user friendly interface designed to promote easy adoption and widespread usage.

Health and Graduate Affairs Committee

Recommendation - Alternative Research Funding

The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council appreciates the consideration of the Higher Education Funding Resolution by the U. T. System Administration. This resolution was provided by the 2012 – 2013 SAC prior to the 83rd Texas Legislative Session. The resolution supported the reconsideration of state appropriations as a portion of the overall operating budget. The Legislature's decision, stated in their August 2013 summary, suggests an optimistic step towards improving alternative funding for institutions and students across Texas. However, the numbers fall short in regard to support of student-based research funding. Considering the FY 2013 sequester, which affected federal funding nationwide, students were left without financial support and unable to complete the research opportunities for graduation. This decreases completion and retention rates statewide.

Federal and state funding provide some of the best support for students and institutions. With the decrease in federal funding, there is also a limited capacity to increase funding from state sources. Alternative funding options must be considered for the success of students both actively in research for their degree and for those pursuing scholarly endeavors within the U. T. System. While being explored, these resources are more difficult for students to attain on their own.

Other avenues for alternative funding have yet to be fully explored at both system and institutional levels, including institutionally derived student-professor collaborative grants and departmental seed grants, tuition revenue bonds, research/academic need-based funding, emergency hiatus funding, and various National Institutes of Health research mentoring programs.

The Council urges the Board of Regents to actively communicate with institutional leadership to ensure that no student is left behind due to underfunding and missed research opportunities. We strongly propose that the Board consider the following to mediate student impact:

1. advocate for funding alternatives at both the state and federal level,
2. encourage institutions to improve efficiency at utilizing the grant enterprise,
3. seek alternatives outside of government funding; and
4. stay actively informed on funding throughout students' academic tenure.

The Council recommends that U. T. System Administration actively identify and distribute information to institutions about alternative funding in an effort to supplement any financial deficits in student-based research opportunities. By providing Systemwide approved alternative methods as well as other currently under-utilized funding mechanisms, the U. T. System can help improve overall student success for students who rely on research funding to complete a degree.

Response:

We are in agreement that opportunities to participate in the research enterprise greatly enhance the educational experience for students in undergraduate, graduate and professional programs. The past few years have seen a decline in the federal research budget (NSF by about 3.5 percent; NIH by about 5 percent). Despite the decline, U. T. System academic campuses have remained successful with increased federal funding. And while state funding for research has declined, our overall academic research budget has continued to increase. Opportunities for graduate and undergraduate students to participate in sponsored research remain strong.

I acknowledge that especially for undergraduate students, opportunities to participate in sponsored research programs continue to be difficult to identify on some of our campuses. Non-sponsored or student-based research programs represent an alternative path towards the research experience. Many of these opportunities are available which require limited funding. However, campus funding for student-based research remains difficult during these periods of budget compression and increased stress due to campus commitments. We will continue to work with campus administration to identify and coordinate alternative funding sources for student-based research considering state, local and private sources. At our academic campuses, we will encourage campus administration to explore establishment of offices of support for student-based research that can provide some of the services available through sponsored project research offices.

From the perspective of our health institutions, challenges exist in obtaining extramural funding for all types of discovery, including student-based research for students. There are a number of innovative programs in place at U.T. System health institutions designed to track and advance student-based research. However, I recognize that further improvement in this area is important. We will send your concerns to the campuses for their consideration and counsel on priorities and strategies for advancing student-based research.

Health and Graduate Affairs Committee

Recommendation - Support in Implementation of Guidelines for Graduate Student Advising

The University of Texas System trains over 40,000 graduate students in diverse and varied fields at fifteen campuses across the System. These students are engaged in training to advance fields of academic scholarship, and to meet the continuing needs of the State of Texas. More than ever before, our graduates face challenging times. Federal research funding sources, including National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Science Foundation (NSF) and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), are in decline. In stark contrast to years past, our graduates face tremendous challenges in finding opportunities upon graduation.

While U. T. System graduate programs continue to attract and train very competitive students, these individuals suffer the consequences of monumental shifts in STEM fields, humanities, and social sciences. Facing difficult decisions upon graduation, former students often choose options for short-term stability over long-term opportunities for career satisfaction, growth, and success. As no guidelines for graduate career advising exist within the U. T. System, many students struggle to seek the employment opportunities for which they are qualified.

Academic administration in our graduate programs has long compelled graduates to seek positions within academia. However, there has been an overall reduction in academic track positions due to an increased pool of qualified applicants, low faculty turnover, and reduced promotion of junior researchers to faculty positions. The prolonged imbalance of opportunities has led to increased competition from a backlog of current postdoctoral fellows. Recent studies demonstrate that less than 23% of students graduating from accredited Ph.D. programs in STEM fields ever acquire tenure-track academic positions. Indeed, changes in the funding mechanism and hiring practices within academia have led to a situation in which the number of graduates cannot be accommodated as faculty within the current organizational structure. This conflict of institutional bias towards academic careers often leads to a shortage of career advising in non-academic track careers, thus perpetuating the problem, and preventing graduates from effectively seeking opportunities outside academia.

While challenges in identifying and seeking the best opportunities are faced by graduate students across the board, historically underrepresented groups are especially likely to suffer the effects of poor or inadequate guidance in their graduate training. These groups are represented in considerable numbers in graduate education, but their prevalence in postdoctoral and faculty populations remains disproportionately low. Additionally, these groups are significantly more likely to suffer unemployment than their counterparts.

Therefore, the Council recommends the development of system-level guidelines regarding formal student advising and career services for graduate students in the U. T. System. The development of these programs should be focused on improving student outcomes system-wide, by preparing our graduates to effectively seek and compete for the best opportunities for their qualifications.

Furthermore, the Council recommends the utilization of data regarding trends in career placement to tailor career advising and training to the needs of students, wherever feasible, including non-academic career tracks. Finally, the Council recommends that these guidelines be incorporated into the existing Milestones Agreement for Graduate Students to ensure that this framework continues to meet its intended goals.

The development of such graduate level advising programs is anticipated to pay short-term benefits, including improved placement rates, reduced time to graduation, and reduced transitional unemployment. Furthermore, implementation of graduate advising is anticipated to provide long-term dividends, such as reduced attrition, expanded presence and competitiveness of U. T. graduate education.

Response:
I share your concern about the successful placement of graduate students upon Ph.D. completion. Competition for tenure-track academic positions is significant, so the exploration of opportunities in non-academic careers is necessary to ensure that our Ph.D. graduates apply their graduate education in meaningful and productive ways through gainful employment.

In the summer of 2012, the Office of Academic Affairs informed each academic president of the need to develop criteria and policies that were consistent with other U. T. academic institutions with regard to Ph.D. student advisement. First, every doctoral program was expected to begin using the Milestones Agreement form with all new doctoral students beginning in Fall 2013. Second, the lack of robust salary and placement data available for doctoral students, and the need for improved career advising, were clearly identified as issues that required attention. Each campus was instructed to submit a plan that included addressing career advising to Ph.D. students.

I am pleased to report that every doctoral program across the U. T. System academic campuses has indicated that it uses the Milestones Agreement Form when advising new doctoral students. Institutions that have recently updated their graduate catalogs have included this requirement so that each Ph.D. student is aware of the advising process. Regarding career advising, academic campuses indicated in their plans that they collect placement data for doctoral students and make data for each doctoral program available to students under the *18 Characteristics of Doctoral Programs* report that the state of Texas requires. Many offer career advising services through on-campus career centers to assist graduate students in their search for both academic and non-academic positions. For example, U. T. Austin subscribes to The Versatile Ph.D. (a web-based program designed to prepare graduates for non-academic careers) while U. T. San Antonio offers several workshops on career preparation for specific disciplines.

Though career advising to graduate students is offered in some form or fashion on each campus, your recommendation to utilize data to tailor career advising and training to the needs of students goes beyond what most institutions currently provide. Each campus has self-reported data available, but it is unclear how this data is included in the advising that occurs between student and advisor during the course of the student's academic program.

To promote the use of data to improve career advising to graduate students, particularly regarding non-academic career options, I will encourage campuses to develop a method of informing students within each doctoral program of the availability of salary and placement data, as well as options available in non-academic fields. This may result in inclusion in the Milestones Agreement Form for some disciplines.

Given that the focus of the agreement is to provide timelines and academic milestones to assist students towards timely graduation, it may be better for academic advisors to refer students to individuals that can best provide them with career advice. Those individuals may be house in the graduate school, in the career center, or within a department, but students should be directed to those that can best serve them in this capacity. Finally, the Office of Strategic Initiatives within the U. T. System has also developed a valuable online resource -- Seek UT -- that can be used by individual students to analyze current and future career and salary trends for the state of Texas based on degree program, level, institution, and field.

Academic Affairs has assured me that this issue will be given significant attention at their Fall 2014 meeting with graduate school deans from each of our academic institutions.

Health and Graduate Affairs Committee

Recommendation - Support for Graduate Medical Education in Texas

It is with great gratitude that The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council recognizes the success of the Board of Regents in the expansion of residency programs in Texas. Additionally, SAC requests that the Board of Regents and U. T. System Administration continue to prioritize the expansion of graduate medical education in Texas to meet the growing needs of the state.

In 2012, SAC encouraged legislative support for existing residency programs and for additional Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) residency positions within the state. Given that the ratio of graduating medical students to first year residency positions in Texas was 0.98:1, along with the addition of Dell Medical School and the establishment of a medical school in the Rio Grande Valley, there is a continuously increasing discrepancy in positions for the Texas-funded students.

Current numbers show that 45% of Texas medical school graduates accept out-of-state residency positions, and the majority of these physicians will set up practice within 100 miles of their residency training program. It was clear that the expansion of residency programs within the state would help keep quality physicians in the state and address the urgent and unmet need for physicians in Texas, which ranks 42nd nationally in physicians per capita.

In May 2013, with the urging of the U. T. System Administration, the Texas Legislature responded. Funding for graduate medical education (GME) was expanded by $16.35 million with allocations primarily to the expansion and innovation of existing programs. Hospitals that have never had ACGME programs could receive part of the $1.875 million to pursue developing programs and $7.375 million would help to expand and increase the number of 1st year residency positions in existing GME programs.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) estimates that achieving the desired 1.1:1 ratio of residency positions to medical school graduates in the state will require $11.7 million in the 2014-2015 biennium, $32.4 million in 2016-2017, and $41.63 million by 2018-2019. Therefore, continued legislative and U. T. System support will be essential.

Response:

I concur with the prioritization to expand graduate medical education (GME) opportunities and am proud of the efforts of the Texas Legislature and U. T. System, led by the Office of Health Affairs. Earlier this year, U. T. System health institutions were awarded support for 21 of the 25 new, first-year resident positions established under the new GME Expansion Program. In addition to efforts made by each of the existing U. T. health institutions to establish new programs and expand existing programs, U. T. System has made a concerted effort to expand GME opportunities in Austin and the Rio Grande Valley where new medical schools are being established. These efforts have been in partnerships with local hospitals and other clinical settings within the respective regions. Plans already in place will account for an increase in first year residency positions in the Rio Grande Valley from 11 to 32 positions Because these residencies are multi-year, the agreements already in place will result in an increase in total residents from 33 to 148 in the region. Similar efforts in Austin have the potential to increase the total number of resident positions from 194 in 2011 to 283 by 2016.

We will continue to work with our institutions and their partners, as well as the Texas Legislature, to help support the expansion and maintenance of high quality GME programs.

Health and Graduate Affairs Committee

Recommendation - In Support of Exit Surveys for Graduate and Professional Students

The U. T. System Student Advisory Council recommends adopting and implementing exit surveys for graduate and professional students (with or without a degree) upon their departure from their institutions to improve the quality of graduate programs and better the student experience.

U. T. System institutions do not currently conduct standard exit surveys of graduate students to evaluate their academic and socio-cultural experiences upon completion of their period of study at each institution. It has been brought to the attention of SAC that some academic and health institutions administer exit surveys based on the Association of American Universities Data Exchange (AAUDE) requirements.

SAC has been made aware of and independently verified similar comprehensive exit surveys conducted on graduate students by multiple institutions across the United States, such as University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, The University of Wisconsin-Madison, The University of Washington-Seattle, and The University of California at Berkeley.

The Council recognizes that an exit survey will provide insight into many aspects of the graduate and professional students' experience throughout their tenure at a U. T. System institution. An exit survey will help identify possible areas for improvement that are necessary for building academic excellence within the graduate and professional programs as well as identify key components of the institutional experience that help sustain current academic excellence within the U. T. System.

Typical exit surveys provide a compilation of questions and solicit comments regarding all facets of graduate student life at the institutions including, but not limited to, the following areas: academic advising, essential research availability, scholarly resources accessibility, work-research environment, financial conditions provided by academic appointments, housing circumstances and general student life at System institutions.

Therefore, SAC recommends the collection of exit surveys for graduate and professional students upon their severance from the University with and without degrees to address issues of attrition and time to degree, and to seek improvements in graduate programs by collecting information about important aspects of their holistic experience at each institution. The exit survey shall provide a compilation of questions and solicit comments regarding all facets of graduate student life at the institution, including but not limited to, the areas mentioned above. To meet the needs of the students served by the System, the Council recommends that exit survey questions be drafted with input from individual institutions and programs and insight from graduate student representatives to address the changing needs and experiences of graduate students.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Texas A&M University have exit surveys that could be adapted and utilized by U. T. System institutions.

Response:

It is tremendously important for U. T. System institutions to understand the various factors that contribute to a student's successful experience in a graduate program upon matriculation or negative factors that cause a student to exit a program before completion. While Milestone Agreement Forms have been recently implemented in 2012 to strengthen academic advising within each graduate program, I recognize that exit surveys might help institutions and programs better understand a student's perspective on the research environment, program dynamics, student affairs support, and even personal or financial concerns that inhibit student success. Aside from academic programmatic concerns, the other factors you have mentioned can also serve as a significant determinant of or deterrent to successful degree completion.

With this in mind, Academic Affairs will give this topic significant consideration at the meeting of graduate deans in Fall 2014. Academic Affairs will work closely with a subset of interested graduate deans and 2014 – 2015 SAC committee member volunteers to discuss and potentially develop a model exit survey for use at U. T. System academic institutions.

For health institutions, important steps toward this goal could include an appraisal of exit interview processes as currently practiced on our campuses, analysis of the potential value of Systemwide standard interview processes and the use of big data analytic methods to identify best practices for student success. We will solicit input from health institutions to address possible implementation strategies.

Financial and Legislative Affairs Committee

Recommendation - Expansion of Financial Literacy Programs

We, The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council, recommend the U. T. System Board of Regents facilitate the implementation of financial literacy programs Systemwide in accordance with the guidelines set forth by Texas Education Code Section 51.305. Financial literacy programs can be defined as any program that aids students in their "ability to make informed judgments and take effective actions regarding the current and future use and management of money." These programs should be established and strongly promoted across the System in response to the national student debt, which is currently over 1 trillion dollars and the average debt of a student in the U. T. System which is approximately $20,958 upon graduation.

The ever-increasing federal loan interest rates (currently at 3.86% and 5.41% for undergraduate and graduate unsubsidized loans), the removal of graduate-level subsidized loans, and students' lack of financial knowledge has impaired the success of U. T. System alumni. While there are some successful programs within the U. T. System, there is a need for uniformly effective and efficient financial literacy programs. This would allow institutions to inform their student populations about the importance of making wise financial decisions, provide much needed student support, and consequently promote time-efficient graduation rates.

The Council recommends that the Board of Regents facilitate the implementation and subsequent upkeep of financial literacy programs. We believe these programs would be most effective if they meet the following criteria:

1. **Be Systemwide and easily accessible to all students and alumni;**
2. **Emulate effective programs currently established within the System; and**
3. **Address the specific financial needs of both undergraduate and graduate students.**

If met, we believe the U. T. System will benefit greatly from having financially educated students that are capable of simultaneously achieving a world-class education while being able to manage their financial responsibilities.

Response:

The U. T. System Board of Regents, campus leadership, and I care deeply about affordability and are aware of the growing student debt burden that many students have shouldered. Because we want to empower our students to make wise financial decisions and smart investments in their futures, many of our campuses have offered some form of financial literacy training for several years. In the same vein, our legislature also recognized the importance of accessible and relevant student financial literacy training when they enacted Senate Bill 1590 in the 83rd legislative session.

Senate Bill 1590 requires institutions to provide financial literacy training to all students on the topics of budgeting, credit cards, savings, loan repayment and consolidation, debt management, taxes, financial planning, insurance, home ownership, and investment strategies. As U. T. System institutions expand the financial literacy training to align with the legislative requirements, the Office of Academic Affairs will work to ensure that the training is easily accessible, robust, and effective at meeting the variety of U. T. System student needs. Each U. T. System institution is required to develop a unique training program and specifically appeals to the needs of students on each campus.

Additionally, U. T. System Administration leadership and campus leadership will strive to keep education affordable, provide work-study and research opportunities on campus, and provide informative resources that help students understand the current and future economic prospects of their chosen field of study and job outlook.

Each of these efforts can help students make informed choices about their financial future.

Campus Life Committee

Recommendation - International Student Engagement Process

According to The University of Texas System Fast Facts of 2013, 16,804 international students were enrolled within our academic and health institutions as of Fall 2012. If current student population growth trends continue, there is evidence that enrollment of international students is likely to increase as well.

Each U. T. System institution is a primary point of contact for prospective international students. Most schools facilitate the acclimation of their new international students through a centralized international offices that assist with advising, financial aid, counseling, and registration help to ensure that these future U.T. students receive the highest quality of educational experience that each of our respective universities has to offer.

However, international students require a more adaptive education in order to effectively incorporate them into their new local community and student body. Therefore, the Council recommends that each institution within the System develop a welcoming and engagement process to help international students with this transition, not only into the institution, but in daily life activities within the United States. For instance, U. T. Dallas provides an array of international student services, including but not limited to immigration advising, integration workshops, and peer mentoring.

Implementing similar programs will aid communication throughout international students' tenure within the System through increased involvement on campus.
Ultimately, we believe this will enhance campus diversity which will benefit domestic and international students alike. We anticipate that a more invested international student population will create a more gratified student population that could help recruit students state-wide and worldwide.

Therefore, in order to accommodate the needs of the U. T. System population at-large, the members of The University of Texas System Student Advisory Council propose the creation of an international student welcoming and engagement process to enhance the services provided by our respective universities.

Response:
International students undoubtedly bring a tremendous amount of value to each and every campus and contribute to making the U. T. System a world-class system of higher education. As our international student population continues to grow, we need to do our best to continue to add value to their experiences on our System campuses. While it is necessary that our international student offices tend to immigration advising, important paperwork, and academic advising, we should strive to make the student experience as welcoming and accommodating as possible. As you have pointed out, and as I have heard on several visits to campuses, academic institutions are finding ways to help integrate new international students in the campus community and the community at-large though workshops, student programming, and mentoring.

I will ask the Office of Academic Affairs to facilitate a meeting of international student officers on each campus so that institutions can share current and promising practices in international student welcoming programs. If recommended, the U. T. System and/or individual campuses may solicit feedback through online surveys to understand the unique needs of the international student population and to determine how U. T. System institutions and System leadership can best provide helpful and engaging programs and services.

Emma, please accept my thanks for the Student Advisory Council's development of wonderful recommendations and presentation of these ideas. The Council's recommendations and my comments will be distributed to campus leadership and among the U. T. System offices. I am grateful for your service to the many students of the U. T. System, and I look forward to continued excellence and sharing of ideas with the Student Advisory Council. Thank you for your time and dedication to the U. T. System.

With greatest respect,

Francisco G. Cigarroa, M.D.
Chancellor

FGC/jbp
cc: Dr. Pedro Reyes
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